

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07 L-03
NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 SAJ-01
LAB-04 /063 W

----- 129890 /73

R 141729Z DEC 76
FM AMEMBASSY LONDON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8740
INFO AMCONSUL BELFAST
AMCONSUL EDINBURGH

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PGOV, PINT, PDEV, UK
SUBJECT: DEVOLUTION: THE GREAT DEBATE BEGINS

REF: (A) LONDON 19409 (B) LONDON 19966 (C) LONDON 20061

SUMMARY. A FOUR-DAY DEBATE ON THE GOVERNMENT'S BILL TO DEVOLVE POWER TO ELECTED ASSEMBLIES IN SCOTLAND AND WALES OPENED DECEMBER 14, WITH PRIME MINISTER CALLAGHAN LEADING OFF FOR THE GOVERNMENT. MRS. THATCHER, SPEAKING FOR THE TORIES, ATTACKED THE BILL, AFFIRMING HER PARTY'S OPPOSITION TO IT. LIBERAL, NATIONALIST AND ULSTER UNIONIST SPOKESMEN TOOK PREDICTABLE POSITIONS, WHILE DISSENTING LABOR AND CONSERVATIVE BACKBENCHERS TOOK ISSUE WITH THE POSITIONS OF THEIR RESPECTIVE FRONTBENCHES. THE DEBATE, THE FIRST TRANCHE OF 30 PARLIAMENTARY DAYS TO BE DEVOTED TO THE BILL, WILL CONCLUDE WITH A SECOND READING VOTE DECEMBER 16. WE EXPECT THE BILL WILL MOVE EASILY INTO COMMITTEE STAGES, BUT SUPPORT ON SECOND READING IS NOT A VALID INDEX OF THE BILL'S ULTIMATE PROSPECTS FOR PASSAGE; THEY REMAIN HIGHLY PROBLEMATIC. THE NUMBER OF CONSERVATIVE MPS THAT DEFY PARTY DISCIPLINE TO VOTE FOR THE BILL OR ABSTAIN REMAINS A POTENTIALLY CRITICAL FACTOR
END SUMMARY.

1. PRIME MINISTER CALLAGHAN OPENED THE FIRST COMMONS DEBATE ON THE GOVERNMENT'S CONTROVERSIAL DEVOLUTION BILL
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(REF. A) DECEMBER 13. HE REVIEWED THE SOMEWHAT HACKNEYED

RATIONALE FOR THE BILL -- IT RESPONDS TO THE WILL OF THE SCOTS AND WELSH, IT ENHANCES POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITY, AND IT REDUCES THE LEGISLATIVE AND ADMINISTRATIVE BURDENS ON CENTRAL GOVERNMENT -- AND AFFIRMED THE GOVERNMENT'S WILLINGNESS TO CONSIDER FURTHER AMENDMENTS TO ITS PROPOSALS. THE CONSERVATIVES, HE HOPED, WOULD THINK AGAIN AND REVISE THEIR OPPOSITION TO THE BILL (REF. B), HELPING "TO AMEND IT AND NOT TO KILL IT". CALLAGHAN DID NOT, AS HAD BEEN WIDELY ANTICIPATED, ANNOUNCE THAT THE GOVERNMENT HAD ACCEPTED THE IDEA OF A REFERENDUM, THOUGH HE CONFIRMED THAT THIS OPTION WAS UNDER SERIOUS STUDY AND THAT IF THE GOVERNMENT DECIDED A REFERENDUM WOULD BE HELPFUL, IT WOULD INTRODUCE AMENDMENTS TO THIS END. WE UNDERSTAND THAT THE GOVERNMENT HAS, IN FACT, DECIDED IN FAVOR OF REFERENDUM, BUT FOR TACTICAL REASONS WISHES TO ANNOUNCE ITS DECISION AT THE CONCLUSION OF THIS STAGE OF THE DEBATE -- LEADER OF COMMONS MICHAEL FOOT WILL WIND UP FOR THE GOVERNMENT ON DECEMBER 16. CALLAGHAN ALSO REAFFIRMED THE GOVERNMENT'S WILLINGNESS TO CONSIDER AMENDMENTS GIVING THE ELECTED ASSEMBLIES REVENUE-RAISING POWERS, PROVIDED THESE POWERS -OPERATE FAIRLY AND ECONOMICALLY" AND LEAVE THE OPTION OF DECIDING WHETHER TO USE THEM TO THE ASSEMBLIES.

2. MRS. THATCHER SPOKE FOR THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY, DECLARING ITS IMPLACABLE OPPOSITION TO THE GOVERNMENT'S BILL WHICH SHE SAID WAS BAD LEGISLATION, WOULD GIVE RISE "TO CONFLICT, BITTERNESS AND ACRIMONY", AND REPRESENTED "MORE GOVERNMENT, MORE MPS, MORE BUREAUCRACY AND MORE COST". SHE ALSO HAMMERED THE GOVERNMENT FOR PROPOSING TO RETAIN THE CURRENT SCOTTISH AND WELSH OVERREPRESENTATION IN COMMONS WHILE DOING NOTHING TO CORRECT NORTHERN IRELAND'S UNDERREPRESENTATION. (WHEN NORTHERN IRELAND WAS INCORPORATED IN THE UK IT RECEIVED LESS THAN A PROPORTIONAL SHARE OF SEATS IN PARLIAMENT BECAUSE OF ITS DEVOLVED FORM OF GOVERNMENT -- IT IS CURRENTLY UNDERREPRESENTED BY ABOUT FOUR SEATS.) MORE NOTEWORTHY, HOWEVER, WAS HER FAILURE TO MAKE EXPLICIT REFERENCE TO HER PARTY'S OFFICIAL COMMITMENT TO DEVOLVE POWER TO SCOTLAND AND WALES. THE GUARDIAN INFERRED THE WORST, LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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HEADLINING "THATCHER SETS OUT TO SWITCH SCOTS POLICY".

3. THE POSITIONS OF THE THE PARTIES WERE GENERALLY AS ANTICIPATED. LIBERAL CHIEF DAVID STEEL CRITICIZED THE BILL ON FOUR COUNTS -- IT LACKED A "DISCERNIBLE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE", IT LEFT SCOTLAND AND WALES OVERREPRESENTED AT WESTMINSTER, IT LACKED A "EUROPEAN EIME SION", AND IT FAILED TO PROVIDE THE ASSEMBLIES WITH

ADEQUATE POWERS OVER INDUSTRY, THE ECONOMY AND
AGRICULTURE -- BUT INDICATED THAT HIS PARTY WOULD SUPPORT

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NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 SAJ-01
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IT IN THE SECOND READING VOTE. NATIONALIST PARTY
LEADERS GWYNFOR EVANS (WELSH) AND DONALD STEWART (SCOTS)
CRITICIZED THE BILL FOR FAILING TO DEVOLVE SUFFICIENT
POWER AND INDICATED THAT THEIR PARTIES WOULD SUPPORT THE
BILL AND TRY TO AMEND IT IN COMMITTEE. ULSTER UNIONIST
SPOKESMAN JAMES MOLYNEAUX STRUCK A DIFFERENT POSTURE: HE
AND HIS COLLEAGUES WILL REFUSE TO SUPPORT THE BILL UNLESS
THE GOVERNMENT AGREES TO GIVE THEM EQUITABLE REPRESENT-
ATION IN COMMONS. SCOTTISH LABOR PARTY MP JOHN ROBERTSON
WELCOMED THE BILL, "WARTS AND ALL", AND AFFIRMED HIS
PARTY YK MPS) WOULD SUPPORT IT.

4. BACKBENCHERTN BOTH SIDES OF THE AISLE MADE NO SECRET
OF THEIR OFTEN PROFOUND DISAGREEMENT WITH THEIR RESPEC-
TIVE FRONTBENCHES. LABOR BACKBENCHERS, FOR THE MOST
PART, INDICATED THAT A FIRM COMMITMENT TO REFERENDUM BY
THE GOVERNMENT WOULD GO A LONG WAY TOWARD OVERCOMING
THEIR DOUBTS, AND SEVERAL TORIES CAME OUT FOUR SQUARE FOR
DEVOLUTION, ALBEIT WITH RESERVATIONS ABOUT THE GOVERN-
MENT'S PROPOSALS. FORMER PRIME MINISTER WILSON, SPEAKING
FROM THE BACKBENCHES FOR THE FIRST TIME IN NEARLY TWENTY-

FIVE YEARS, WARMLY ENDORSED THE BILL, ATTACKED
CONSERVATIVE OPPOSITION TO IT AND EXPRESSED HIS BELIEF
THAT POWER WOULD ALSO HAVE TO BE TRANSFERRED FROM WHITE-
HALL TO THE REGIONS OF ENGLAND.
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5. COMMENT. THE FIRST OF FOUR DAYS' DEBATE ON DEVOLU-
TION WENT AS HAD BEEN EXPECTED, WITH ONLY MINOR EXCEP-
TIONS, AND THERE WAS LITTLE THAT WAS NEW IN THE ARGU-
MENTS EITHER PRO OR CON. THE NEXT THREE DAYS ARE LIKELY
TO FOLLOW THE SAME PATTERN. IF, AS WE EXPECT, THE
GOVERNMENT FORMALLY COMMITS ITSELF TO REFERENDA IN SCOT-
LAND AND WALES BEFORE THE SECOND READING VOTE, THE BILL
SHOULD SAIL INTO THE COMMITTEE STAGES BY A COMFORTABLE
MARGIN, SAY BY 40 TO 60 VOTES. IF THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD
AVOID SUCH A COMMITMENT, THE VOTE COULD BE MUCH CLOSER.
WE WOULD STRESS, HOWEVER, THAT THE SECOND READING VOTE
IS NOT A RELIABLE INDICATOR OF HOW THE BILL WILL COME
OUT. BY APPROVING THE SECOND READING, THOSE HAVING
SPECIFIC OBJECTIONS TO THE BILL ARE KEEPING THEIR OPTIONS
OPEN. SHOULD THE BILL FAIL TO BE AMENDED TO MEET THEIR
OBJECTIONS, THEY MAY NOT HESITATE TO VOTE AGAINST IT AT
THE CONCLUSION OF COMMITTEE STAGES. MOREOVER, SEVERAL
ANTI-DEVOLUTIONIST LABOR MPS HAVE INDICATED THAT THEY
FEEL OBLIGED TO SUPPORT THE BILL AT SECOND READING BE-
CAUSE OF LABOR'S MANIFESTO COMMITMENT, BUT THAT THERE-
AFTER THEY ARE ENTITLED TO VOTE THEIR CONSCIENCE. AS WE
HAVE INDICATED PREVIOUSLY (REF. A), THE KEY FACTOR TO
WATCH IN THE UPCOMING VOTE IS THE NUMBER OF TORY MPS
WHO DEFY THE CONSERVATIVE THREE LINE WHIP TO SUPPORT THE
BILL OR ABSTAIN; THEY MAY ULTIMATELY DECIDE THE FUTURE OF
DEVOLUTION AND OF THE UK.

ARMSTRONG

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: GOVERNMENT REFORM, DEBATES, PARTY LINE, LEGISLATIVE BILLS, SELFDETERMINATION, OPPOSITION PARTIES
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 14 DEC 1976
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: ElyME
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1976LONDON20195
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D760460-0778
From: LONDON
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1976/newtext/t19761245/aaaabmra.tel
Line Count: 208
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION EUR
Original Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 4
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: 76 LONDON 19409, 76 LONDON 19966, 76 LONDON 20061
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: ElyME
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 13 MAY 2004
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <13 MAY 2004 by GarlanWA>; APPROVED <07 SEP 2004 by ElyME>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
04 MAY 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: DEVOLUTION: THE GREAT DEBATE BEGINS
TAGS: PGOV, PINT, PDEV, UK, (THATCHER, MARGARET), (CALLAGHAN, JAMES)
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 04 MAY 2006